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Foreign and Commonwealth Office

London SW1A 2AH

Prime Minister

16 May 1980

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Michael Alexander Esq
No 10 DOWNING STREET

Mr Craig is a rather outspoken man
but he is probably the best Arabist in
Govt. employ at present.

Dear Michael,

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Andrew
- 19/5

SAUDI ARABIA

1. As you will know only too well, the recent showing here of the television film "Death of a Princess" has had a very damaging effect on Anglo/Saudi relations, though we hope it will not prove lasting. One immediate result has been the banishment from Jeddah of our Ambassador, James Craig. But before he left he found time to write the enclosed Despatch "Au Revoir to Saudi Arabia". It is a brief but incisive study of Saudi attitudes and the effect on them of the rapid social development which Saudi Arabia has seen during the last generation. It strikes us here as a good piece which provides some perceptive insights into the attitudes underlying recent Saudi reactions.

2. Sir Michael Palliser is sending copies of the Despatch to a number of his colleagues in Whitehall with the suggestion that they might show it to their Ministers and to any senior officials who have to be particularly involved in Anglo/Saudi relations. He thinks that you may wish also to see the Despatch and perhaps show it to the Prime Minister. We are treating the Despatch in a rather restricted fashion because we want to minimise any risk that it might be leaked to the press! The damage to British interests if this were to happen would be incalculable but certainly severe.

Yours ever,
Andrew

R A Burns
Private Secretary to the
Permanent Under Secretary

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MFJ

Saudi Arabia

21 May 1980

Saudi Arabia

The Prime Minister has read with interest James Craig's despatch enclosed with your letter to me of 16 May.

M. O'D. B. ALEXANDER

R.A. Burns, Esq.,
Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

ABJ

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AU REVOIR TO SAUDI ARABIA

S U M M A R Y

1. The Saudis are hard to like but we must try to understand them. In thirty five years they have moved from stone-age poverty to unprecedented wealth. The change in British society over the same period has caused us serious strains. The change in Saudi Arabia has been a hundred times as great. We cannot blame them if some barbarities or stupidities remain. (paras 1 - 3)
2. The outstanding characteristics in the Saudis. First they are convinced of their superiority. This conviction is not affected by their colossal debt to the West. They cannot live without foreign help. But the number and nature of the expatriates are unnatural. The system cannot last. (paras 4 - 5)
3. Secondly, Saudis are Moslems, yet exposed to the temptations of the non-Moslem world. Their way out of the dilemma is hypocrisy. Their wealth has caused them to buy western amenities before they have had time to change the social code which went with an absence of amenities. They feel that God has at last given them their due reward. (paras 6 - 7)

4. The other side of the coin: miraculous achievements in economic development. Though the technology has come from the West and the money from Providence, the policy decisions have been taken by Saudis, and by Saudis who grew up in the old days. They are supported by the new generation, western-educated, who are accomplished and impressive. If they have made mistakes, they have more excuse than we. (para 8)

5. No affection for the Saudis; but (reluctantly) admiration and sympathy. (para 9)

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BRITISH EMBASSY

JEDDA

29 April 1980

The Right Honourable
The Lord Carrington KCMG MC
etc etc etc

My Lord,

AU REVOIR TO SAUDI ARABIA ✓

1. It is not easy to like the Saudis; and the task has so far proved beyond me. But it is imperative in our own interest, and desirable for reasons of human kindness, to try to understand them. I have the honour in this despatch to neglect entirely the current political issues which have led to my banishment and to treat some of the social factors that lie behind them. I shall use a very broad brush.

2. Thirty five years ago, when I was already a grown man, the Saudis were roughly at the point which the British had reached in the days of Boadicea. The majority of the population wandered the desert in a life of unspeakable hardship. The only permanent buildings were made of mud or, here in Jedda, of coral dug from the sea. There was no industry and the only agriculture was a few date palms. In the time it has taken me to get married and raise a family the House of Saud have not only crossed 2,000 years of history: they have moved from stone-age destitution to a wealth never before known in the world. The baby born in a tent with ten shillings' worth of pots and bedding is now a cabinet minister with a Harvard PhD

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and billions of dollars to spend on bridges, airports, computers and petrochemical plants. The same girl who trudged 30 miles a day with her goats across the sand dunes now flies every weekend to her estate on the shores of Lake Geneva.

3. We in Britain have had thirty five years of the fastest change in our history; and we can all see the splits and strains in our society that have resulted. Here the change has been a hundred times as great and a hundred times as fast. If some - many - barbarities remain, is that surprising or a cause for blame? Starting from Boadicea, we ourselves took eighteen centuries to get rid of public executions. How can we expect the Saudis in one generation to understand a slick and mean film on the television and the subtleties of press freedom, censorship and libel law that make it possible?

4. There are, I suppose, two outstanding characteristics about the Saudis. First they are convinced - rich and poor, high and low - that they are superior to every other people in the world. This feeling goes back, I should guess, to the toughness and fortitude bred in them by generations of a life in the harshness and misery of the desert which they believe, perhaps rightly, no other people could have borne. The fact that everything, every single thing, in their new life is owed to the West, does not diminish their arrogance. The West is skilled in certain technical operations which the Saudis can buy. But does a duke feel inferior to his tailor because he cannot make a pair of trousers? Foreigners, other Arabs as

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well as the Franks, are a lesser breed. My driver, a Yemeni, will carry my bag; my bodyguard, a Saudi corporal, never. The Foreign Minister's private secretary, a most sophisticated man, told me once that he had had an unpleasant incident at the airport the previous day: another Saudi had been rude to him. "Of course", he added, "I was wearing a suit at the time": i.e. the other man didn't know he was a Saudi. The relationship between us Westerners who feel superior because we are the teachers and the Saudis who feel superior because they pay our wages can never be a happy one.

5. Yet Saudi Arabia cannot, in its present form, do without foreigners. Something like a quarter of its population is foreign. It is not unnatural that other Arabs from neighbouring countries where money is short should come here to find work. It is utterly unnatural that hundreds of thousands of foreigners should be brought in by recruiting agencies from the ends of the earth, not knowing and never learning the Arabic language or Arab ways, living in barracks, moving from work to sleep and back to work; that in your Holiday Inn the receptionist should be Moroccan, the waiters Philippino, the room attendants Pakistani, the cleaners Thai; that there is no such thing as a Saudi carpenter or a Saudi plumber. It is a helot society, even if the helots are, by the standards of their native lands, well paid; and in my view it cannot last.

6. Secondly, the Saudis are Moslems. Some are more devout than others; but they all have a deep faith that God is there and will punish or reward and that other religions are not just inferior, but wrong. Yet the temptations of the non-Moslem western world press in daily. The only way out of the dilemma is hypocrisy. No doubt a little hypocrisy makes the world go round. But there can be nowhere on earth where there is so much hypocrisy as in Saudi Arabia. Examples abound as you move through this infuriating land. One must suffice. The managers of the national airline feel that they must ape the modes and gimmicks of British Airways, TWA and the rest. They must therefore have air hostesses. It is unthinkable that Saudi girls should follow so unchaste a profession, one where they must talk to, even touch, members of the opposite sex. So girls are recruited from Europe, America, India and the Far East (no matter that they cannot communicate with most of the passengers). And the recruiting advertisements, in this society where a woman must cover her face lest a rosy lip or a blooming cheek rouse men to paroxysms of desire, ask for girls of "reasonable height and good appearance" that is, girls who can be looked at with pleasure - and sexual pleasure at that. This is where hypocrisy links up with the consciousness of superiority. A Saudi woman cannot fly in an aeroplane or ride in a taxi without a male escort, even if it be a ten-year-old boy. But a foreign woman, where the smooth running of a Saudi institution demands it, can pass round the lemonade and demonstrate to 200 strange men the use of an oxygen mask.

7. I do not like all this. But I understand how it has happened. The sudden acquisition of vast wealth has enabled Saudis, has forced them, to buy the amenities of western life before they have had time to change the social code which went with a total absence of amenities. They were not eased into change by a period of colonization or an interval of gradual economic development. They do not feel lucky and therefore grateful. They always knew they were tough and strong and brave. God has at last seen fit to give them what they always deserved. The world has at last been put to rights.

8. But now, to set against the arrogance and the barbarities, let us recognise that what the Saudis have achieved in so brief a time is little short of miraculous. When Mr Attlee was our Prime Minister, Saudi Arabia was a desert with a well of brackish water every hundred miles, served by a scabrous goatskin at the end of a rope of twisted palm fronds. There are now taps and swimming pools and dams and aqueducts. There is a network of roads and airports; harbours, air-conditioning, desalination, radar, jets. Tribesmen who could not understand the next tribe now speak like the BBC. Earthquakes in Peru and strikes in Cowley are the daily gossip among men who used to ask only whether the rain had fallen in the sands beyond the next range of mountains. Of course they have had all the money they needed. Of course they have had lots of help from outside. But the policy decisions have been taken by Saudis; and until recently, by Saudis like King Faisal and Prince Fahd who grew up in the economy and morality of Abraham and Isaac. Beneath them, the

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new men from MIT and Berkeley are accomplished and impressive, despite the newness of the disciplines they have had to learn.

If they have made mistakes, so have we, with far less excuse; and bad cess, as the Koran says, to those who quibble and carp.

9. I return to where I began: at no time do I feel any affection for the Saudis, as I do, very occasionally, for other Arabs. What I do feel is irritation, reluctant admiration and (when I try hard) sympathy for the problems they face and for their inability to understand the people like us with whom they have to deal and whom they would much prefer to be shot of.

10. I am sending copies of this despatch to Her Majesty's Representatives at Cairo, Tel Aviv, Amman, Damascus, Washington and all Gulf posts.

I have the honour to be,

my Lord,

with the utmost truth and regard,

your Lordship's humble and obedient servant

James Craig

19 MAY 1980

